



HOW TO...

Create digital abstract art

As well as enhancing digital images to give them added realism or appeal, you can also use them as the basis for artistic endeavours. **Mike Bedford** explains how to create unusual pieces from everyday objects

It's often said that a camera never lies, but that's not true. Deliberately over- and underexposing by using a very limited depth of field and permitting motion blur can help you become more creative in your photography, and the results don't mimic reality. Digital manipulation means the gap between the real world and the world of the photograph can be further widened. Here we look at how you can produce results that look more like abstract art than photography.

We have investigated this subject before, in the June 2004 issue of *Computer Shopper* ('How to... take abstract photographs'), but on that occasion we were using nature as our inspiration. However, now the summer months are a distant memory and trips into the country are less frequent, we thought we'd show you how to create works of art using subjects you'll find in towns and cities, and even your own home. You can use your abstract images as Windows wallpaper, web backgrounds (as long as they're subtle) or, if you really hit the jackpot, frame them and hang them on the wall.

VISUAL AIDS

It is difficult to teach the sort of creativity you require here, so instead of providing a step-by-step method for generating a work of art, we're showing you three abstract images that we created with brief details of how we produced them. You may choose to use the same techniques, but our aim is to help you start thinking creatively. You'll need to start with some practical tips, though.

Abstract images often rely on shape, pattern, texture and colour so, at least in the beginning, this is what you should look for. You don't have to get all four elements in every shot – often one is enough – and you might be able to add some of the missing ingredients when you process your image later. Just don't go overboard on post-processing, and bear in mind that less can often be more, as the resurgence in popularity of black and white photographs illustrates.

Sometimes you'll find a scene that has all the right ingredients for a piece of abstract art and you'll be able to use it straight from the camera. Often you'll need to manipulate the photograph in some way, so don't try anything too clever when you take the shot – just aim to get a photograph that's perfectly exposed and pin sharp. This will maximise your options when you start to work on your basic image. Bracket your photographs – that is, take a shot at the theoretically correct exposure and a stop either side – to make sure you get an ideal exposure. Use a small aperture to achieve a good depth of field, especially if you're working up close. And consider using a tripod in poor light to prevent camera shake. 

TERRACOTTA ROOF

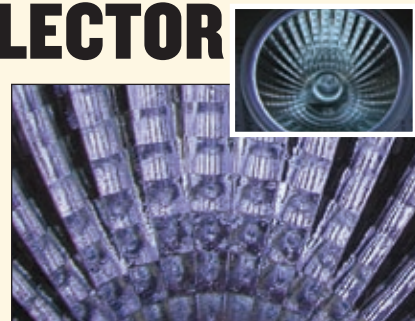
The original photograph was of a portion of an Italian roof and it would have been an interesting photograph in its own right, being so typical of the Mediterranean. Here, though, we used the pattern of tiles to produce a more abstract image. We chose this roof because its non-uniform nature made for a more interesting shot than the modern roofs nearby. The first job in processing the image was to increase the contrast to further emphasise the pattern. Next we needed to disguise the real subject by getting rid of that tell-tale terracotta colour. We did this using an effect called tritone, which together with duotone is available in most



photo-manipulation packages. In a tritone image, one of three colours is assigned to an image depending on its brightness, not its true colours. A bit of trial and error produced the result here.

LIGHTBULB REFLECTOR

You don't have to leave the house to find an abstract image; inspiration can come from everyday objects. Here a 12V dichroic lightbulb caught my eye. You may have looked at these bulbs on many occasions but never noticed the intricate pattern of the reflector. By zooming in to capture just a small portion, few people will recognise what it is, which is a big plus in creating an abstract work of art. Because the glass is so reflective, we knew that the exposure would be tricky. Rather than rely on the camera's metering system, we bracketed the exposure and picked the best one. Because the subject wasn't flat, depth of



field would be an issue so we used a small aperture. The image you see here is almost exactly as it came out of the camera.

SHADOWY FORM

As an alternative to finding abstract patterns in the world around you, how about creating your own patterns artificially? One way of doing that is to project shadows on a piece of paper as we did for this shot. The setup was simple – we taped a piece of paper to the wall, used an object to cast a shadow, added two dichroic spotlights, one with a red filter, and then put the camera on a tripod since light levels would be low. After a bit of experimenting, we came up with an interesting set of shadows and took the shot. Looking at the image on a monitor, we were pleased with the coloured shadows but found the white and pink areas rather plain. Casting the shadows on



textured paper may help, but since we didn't have any to hand we added a texture artificially using a photo-manipulation package.